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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 000360

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SUBJECT: EMBASSY WORKING VARIOUS FRONTS TO KEEP BALIKATAN
EXERCISE ON TRACK

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: With the U.S.-Philippine Balikatan joint military exercise set to begin February 18, all Embassy elements, to include JSOTF-P personnel, have been moving aggressively to counter negative publicity by a vocal minority of political and social leaders, who in recent weeks have sought to gain political capital by mischaracterizing Balikatan as a hostile military exercise aimed at the people of Mindanao. In response, the Ambassador and Mission representatives have actively engaged key Muslim politicians, community leaders, individuals involved in the peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and the leadership of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to emphasize the humanitarian nature of the exercise and prepare public affairs groundwork to ensure Balikatan's success. Mission representatives have highlighted significant themes, including that no military exercises will take place in Mindanao or the Sulu Archipelago; that all activities in these regions will be humanitarian in nature; and that the U.S. personnel who are participating will work alongside their Philippine counterparts at all times. In various meetings, Mission representatives and JSOTF-P staff have encouraged political leaders and the Philippine military to address concerns head-on and to stress that Balikatan is part of the multifaceted framework of cooperation that exists between our respective countries. The outreach blitz appears to have garnered the support of several Muslim decisionmakers, but we will continue our efforts as we approach the February 18 opening date. END SUMMARY.

SENSITIVITIES OVER MILITARY PRESENCE STIR REACTION

12. (C) A variety of factors have conspired to create some anti-Balikatan sentiment over the past several weeks. Chief among these are almost complete turnover in local Muslim political leadership after the May 2007 elections, combined with several turnovers in Philippine Armed Forces commanders in the Muslim Lanao region; lingering suspicions and misunderstandings among Muslims at the grassroots level about the presence of U.S. military troops in Mindanao; the agendas of human rights activists, leftist political organizations, religious groups, and local government leaders; and continuing impasse in Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace talks with the Philippine government. The local press -- prone to sensationalism and misquoting sources -- aggravated the situation, publicizing false allegations in late December that U.S. troops ordered a hospital closed at night in Panamao, Jolo. The hospital controversy came on the

heels of unsupported claims by two non-governmental organizations and a leftist political party that the United States was building a military base in Mindanao, which would violate the Philippines Constitution.

13. (C) A series of rallies across Mindanao supporting a resumption of government peace talks with the MILF took on an anti-Balikatan dimension during a January 22 protest rally organized by the Muslim Multisectoral Movement for Peace and Development in Iligan, Lanao del Norte. In an eight-point resolution later issued by over 200 Muslim religious leaders (ulama) from throughout the Philippines at their Summit in Manila January 28-30, the influential and respected ulama "urged the National Government and concerned local government units to review and stop the Balikatan exercises from taking place in peaceful Muslim areas as such would create an impression of intrusion upon peace and harmony in these areas."

14. (C) Following a series of January 30 meetings between the leaders of Muslim multi-sectoral groups, Lanao del Sur Province Governor Mamintal "Bombit" Adiong, and Marawi Mayor Fahad Pre Salic, these Muslim groups held an anti-Balikatan rally in the Islamic City of Marawi February 5. Coinciding with this rally was an anti-Balikatan speech that was delivered to the House of Representatives by Lanao del Sur Province Congressman Pangalian Balindong, and the passage of an anti-Balikatan resolution by the Regional Legislative Assembly of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

QUICK EMBASSY RESPONSE

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15. (C) Our response has been rapid and thorough, reaching out to all levels of the political and military hierarchy. Urged by the Ambassador to engage political leaders and the public on Balikatan ("shoulder to shoulder" in Filipino), Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Hermogenes Esperon briefed on January 29 the media on events associated with the exercise in the Mindanao city of Cagayan de Oro. Despite emphasizing that the vast majority of the 5,700 U.S. troops would be positioned in Luzon, critics and fringe groups in Mindanao quickly focused only on the numbers of troops participating in the exercise and not on where troops would be deployed or what types of activities would be occurring in different areas. In response to queries from leading politicians in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the Embassy (with input from JSOTF-P) produced a series of briefing papers tailored to each province, so that the entire Mission could provide specific information on Balikatan activities.

16. (C) Embassy political officers are engaging local and national Muslim officials on the humanitarian aspects of Balikatan. Despite the rallies and protests in the Lanao areas, Lanao del Sur Congressman Pangalian Balindong welcomed Balikatan's humanitarian assistance, and viewed the U.S. role in the Mindanao peace process as "critical." In a February 7th letter, Lanao del Norte Congressman Abdullah Dimaporo and his son, Governor Mohammad Khalid Dimaporo, expressed full support and cooperation for the Balikatan exercises, and requested the inclusion of additional municipalities from their province in the humanitarian mission. ARMM Regional Legislative Assemblyman Esmael Mangudadatu also expressed full support for Balikatan's "good works" in Muslim communities within his native province of Maguindanao.

AMBASSADOR/DCM ENGAGING POLITICAL LEADERS

17. (C) The Ambassador and DCM met with and/or spoke by telephone with eight key governors in Mindanao, plus ARMM

Speaker Paisalin Tago, MILF Vice-Chairman Ghazali Jaafar, Mindanao Congresswoman Darlene Custodio, and Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema. In each case, the Ambassador and DCM allayed concerns of large-scale U.S. troop deployments and emphasized that all Balikatan activities in the southern Philippines would be humanitarian in nature and coordinated with the AFP to provide health, educational, and economic benefits to the population. Almost invariably, these political leaders volunteered their strong support for USAID development assistance over the last ten years, which has clearly provided entree for their support for U.S. military assistance such as in Balikatan. On February 8, the Ambassador traveled to General Santos City in southern Mindanao and met with local governors Miguel Dominguez of Sarangani and Daisy Avance-Fuentes of South Cotabato. The Ambassador addressed their concerns over Balikatan activities in the Liguasan Marsh, a MILF stronghold, that in the past has been area that has seen intense fighting between Philippine government forces and Muslim insurgents.

NEXT STEPS

18. (C) Mission outreach will continue the week of February 11 as Embassy Public Affairs staff, JSOTF-P and Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group personnel, and the AFP Balikatan commander travel to Mindanao to work with Philippine commanders at Western Mindanao Command in Zamboanga and Eastern Mindanao Command in Davao on a combined public affairs strategy for Balikatan. Embassy Public Affairs will assist AFP Balikatan commander in preparing for meetings with the Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities, the MILF mechanism that is charged with deconflicting misunderstandings between the AFP and the MILF.

BALIKATAN: A PRIME EXAMPLE OF U.S.-PHILIPPINE COOPERATION

19. (C) Balikatan was first held in 1991 and has evolved over the last 17 years into the premier U.S-Philippine military exercise, involving approximately 5,700 U.S. troops and thousands of members of the Philippine Armed Forces this year. Balikatan offers U.S. and Philippine armed forces an opportunity to work as partners in developing stronger

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coordination and cooperation through field training exercises, staffing exercises and civil-military operations. This year, joint staff training simulation exercises in Manila and Clark (on the island of Luzon) will focus on disaster assistance planning and maritime security. All field exercises will take place on Luzon as well and are held in conjunction with community relations projects in the localities where they will occur. In Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the focus will be on humanitarian exercises, with only civil-military projects planned. Approximately 130 U.S. personnel will assist their Philippine counterparts in conducting 23 medical, dental, and engineering assistance projects in the region, which will bring much-needed care and infrastructure to thousands of Muslim residents in some of the poorest areas of the country. Additionally, for the first time, there will be civil-military projects in southern Palawan. The projects, conducted by the AFP and the U.S. 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, will take place in an area where the Muslim population historically has not received much economic support from the Philippine government and welcomes U.S. assistance.

COMMENT

10. (C) The public and political skepticism of a minority of inhabitants of Muslim Mindanao leading up to this year's

Balikatan events, and the indifference or inaction of some Manila- and Mindanao-based political elites, underscore the importance of early outreach strategies on the part of the Philippine and U.S. governments to inform local audiences about the nature of events that will occur. As it is, Balikatan 2008 stands to be the most robust U.S.-Philippine military exercise in some time. Events in 2005 (the southeast Asian tsunami) and 2006 (typhoon-caused landslides in the central Philippines) perhaps deflected much of the scrutiny that Balikatan would normally receive, as the exercise was adapted to be heavily oriented towards relief efforts. In 2007, controversy over the conviction of a U.S. Marine on a rape charge generated opposition to events planned in Luzon among left-leaning groups and certain political elites, leading to a canceling of all field training components. This year, we are reminded that while the Muslim population and its political leadership are effusive in their support for U.S. development and humanitarian assistance, they remain wary of such assistance when it is conducted by uniformed military personnel, whether they be Philippine or U.S. troops. Our military activities, while always AFP-led, can push the envelope of public opinion. Persistent, proactive public diplomacy is essential in maintaining support assistance involving U.S. military throughout the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, and the Embassy, together with JSOTF-P, continue to work closely with our Philippine counterparts to emphasize the need for a clear and continuous public message on the benefits of U.S.-Philippine cooperation coming from them.

KENNEY